Democracy Support Strategies: Leading with Women's Political Empowerment

With many emerging democracies experiencing stagnation or setbacks, providers of democracy support are struggling to tailor assistance strategies to highly varied transitional contexts. As a crucial area of international aid for democracy as well as for development more generally, efforts to bolster women's political empowerment share this challenge. Strategic differentiation not only helps identify what types of programs may be most effective in advancing gender equality in politics but also reveals how this work can be a critical lever for broader change where attempted transitions have slipped into dysfunctional patterns.

Responding to the Heterogeneity of Political Transitions

Identify and define the transitional context. Three types of alternative transitional paths merit particular attention: stuck transitions, semiauthoritarian contexts, and conflict-affected transitions. However, adding to the analytic complexity is that countries can move suddenly from one type to another or embody elements of more than one simultaneously.

Reconfigure the standard menu of women's programming. Answering three key questions can help formulate differentiated strategies for each

transitional context: What are the distinctive gender characteristics of political life in this context? What are the implications of those characteristics for women's political empowerment programming? How might efforts to advance women's political empowerment become a specific lever to help a country move forward democratically?

Some Preliminary Findings

Stuck transitions. Hobbled by profoundly weak representational relationships between power holders and citizens, stuck transitions present daunting challenges for women's political empowerment work. Nevertheless, emphasizing constituency outreach work by women in parties, highlighting women's political activism for anticorruption, and building connections between women in political parties and women civic activists can make a difference.

Semiauthoritarian contexts. Underrepresentation of women in political life is often severe in semiauthoritarian countries—sharp limitations on the electoral process undercut the meaningfulness of women voting, becoming active in political parties, and

competing for office. Yet, persisting with women's political empowerment work can pay off when a political opening eventually occurs and women's political actors are ready to employ strong grassroots networks to take advantage of the moment.

Conflict-affected transitions. Violent conflict damages the core political processes and institutions that are the usual focus of women's political empowerment programming. However, several areas of assistance have proved useful, including bolstering women's participation in peace negotiations, ensuring an active role of women in constitution-writing processes, and pushing for gender equality reforms when electoral and party laws are rewritten.

The Imperative of Strategic Differentiation

Moving Beyond the Transition Paradigm

When it emerged as a new area of international assistance in the 1980s and 1990s, democracy assistance employed a relatively clear and uniform democratic transition model. Central to this model was an assumed set of three main transitional stages: (1) a pretransition phase marked by political ferment and a partial opening of an authoritarian system; (2) a transition phase marked by a full opening, including the revision of basic political rules and conducting of foundational elections; and (3) a sustained phase of democratic consolidation during which, for example, the new political rules become fully internalized in society, state institutions strengthen their representational capacity, political parties establish constituencies, and the rule of law deepens. Intrinsic to this model were a related set of assumptions about the centrality of elections to democratization, the attractive power of the democratic idea, and the importance of political agency over structure.

Based on this transition paradigm, democracy aid providers developed a core strategy, focused on helping countries move through the three phases. During the wave of democracy around the world, the strategy was applied in dozens of countries through a relatively standard menu of democracy programming: assistance to promote free and fair elections, political party development, parliamentary strengthening, rule of law strengthening, civil society development, media development, and local government strengthening.

> Strategic differentiation must be part of country strategy development—thinking through what mix of programs is most likely to be effective in a particular context.

The transition paradigm embodied a strong logic that appeared to match the pattern of

events in the numerous countries exiting authoritarianism in that period. But political developments in many countries during the last decade and a half have called into question the framework's validity.[1] Although some countries have moved along something resembling the assumed transitional path and are in a process of or have achieved democratic consolidation, more countries have not been following the transition paradigm. Some have gotten stuck along the way in dysfunctional blockages, in which democratic forms do not produce democratic substance. Others have veered sideways, ending up with hybrid regimes of different types that have some elements of democracy but also some elements of authoritarian rule. Others have ended up fully lapsing back into authoritarianism. Still, others are mired in persistent conflict, having experienced disruptive conflict during what appeared to be stable consolidation processes, or are only just starting to emerge from conflict decades after leaving authoritarianism behind.

The changing global democracy landscape has made strategic differentiation an important imperative. That is, democracy aid providers face the dual need to (1) replace the uniform transition paradigm with a more differentiated categorization or framework for understanding and describing political transitions and (2) formulate differentiated assistance strategies that respond to the specific challenges of the varied transitional contexts in which they work. Strategic differentiation must be part of country strategy development—thinking through what mix of programs is most likely to be effective in a particular context. And it also must be central to specific program development—figuring out, for example, how elections assistance or parliamentary strengthening work should vary based on the political context, getting away from standard approaches to these specific areas of practice.

Recognizing the Centrality of Women's Political Empowerment

When the transition paradigm emerged as part of the spread of global democracy in the 1980s and early 1990s, women's political empowerment was only a relatively weak element of the initial framework. It was present but generally not well-articulated or strongly pursued by mainstream aid actors. In the intervening years, however, it has gained a stronger place, and acceptance has grown of the general principle that women's political equality is central to the quality and integrity of democratic practice and governance. The idea that women's political empowerment contributes directly to, and in some ways is a prerequisite for, sustainable development also has gained ground.

> Work on women's political empowerment has come to represent a crucial evolutionary element of democracy

This has been a result, in part, of the generally positive evolution in established democracies of the role of women in politics and thus greater impetus for taking this experience abroad. It also reflects the growing recognition since the early 1990s that greater inclusiveness of women and other traditionally disadvantaged groups will not naturally or necessarily occur in contexts of democratization—activists in democratizing countries and the external aid practitioners supporting them need to give sustained and specific attention to inclusiveness if it is to advance. Work on women's political empowerment has come to represent a crucial evolutionary element of democracy support and development assistance more generally.

> Aid providers have made little effort to articulate and formalize the various approaches being used in different environments.

As an essential area of international democracy support, work relating to women's political empowerment shares the challenge of adapting to the more varied transitional landscape of recent years—that is, responding to the imperative of strategic differentiation. As with other major areas of democracy support, a quick look at aid programming relating to women's political empowerment gives at least an initial impression of strategic uniformity—a standard array of activities carried out wherever such assistance takes place. This array is a response to what are perceived to be a relatively common set of conditions of gender inequality in the political life of transitional countries around the world: systemic underrepresentation of women in all levels of political life, poor responsiveness by major political institutions to basic women's interests and needs, and diverse formal and informal obstacles to women's political participation (for example, discriminatory laws and adverse cultural norms). The main programmatic components include the following:

- *Strengthening the role of women within political parties*, with particular emphasis on bolstering the presence of women within party leadership structures and increasing the number of women candidates for local and national offices (through leadership training for women party activists and advocacy with party leaders).
- *Increasing the chances of women candidates to win elections in local and/or national legislative bodies* through training women candidates, helping women candidates address the challenge of campaign funding, and supporting civil society groups that carry out gender-focused voter education.
- *Advocating the adoption of gender quotas in political institutions* through working with civil society groups pushing for quotas, legislators, and other politicians who may support quotas, and once quotas are in place, supporting strong

implementation and the refinement of quotas through both civil society monitoring and political action.

- *Increasing the effectiveness and capacity of women elected officials* through training newly elected women officials; assisting in the formation of networks of women politicians, including women's political caucuses; and connecting women officials and politicians to women civil society leaders and activists.

Moreover, an assumed series of standard transitional stages remains an important part of the framing of women's political empowerment programming. For example, a recent study by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *Women's Leadership as a Route to Greater Empowerment*, outlines a framework for programming based around four phases: transition, preelection, election, and postelection/governance.[2] The study highlights which elements from the standard menu of interventions fit under each phase. During an initial transition, aid providers might help women play an active role in constitution writing; whereas in the preelection phase, the priority might be working with parties to encourage the nomination of women candidates. In the election phase, providers may shift to the training of actual candidates, and then in the postelection phase, emphasize capacity building for newly elected women and the creation of women's caucuses.

Aligning Women's Political Empowerment Programming With Varied Transitional Contexts

Looking more deeply into the practice of women's political empowerment, it is clear that aid organizations are already attempting to adapt their efforts to the more varied transitional landscape that now confronts all democracy promoters. Programs that appear similar in terms of their basic activities actually vary considerably based on how their activities are adapted to local circumstances. But as with most other areas of democracy assistance, aid providers have made little effort to articulate and formalize the various approaches being used in different environments and to systematically align them with a well-differentiated categorization of political contexts. This paper is a first attempt at such an effort.

To analyze the strategic differentiation of women's political empowerment work in "nonstandard" transitional contexts, I use a very basic three-part categorization: (1) stuck transitions, (2) semiauthoritarian contexts, and (3) conflict-affected transitions. For each of these three contexts, I provide preliminary answers to three questions central to formulating differentiated strategies for advancing women's political empowerment:

- What are the distinctive gender characteristics of political life (relevant to the state, political society, and civil society) in each context?
- What are the implications of those characteristics for the standard menu of women's political empowerment programming?
- How might efforts to advance women's political empowerment create valuable entry points for advancing democratic change? That is, what is the case for pursuing women's political empowerment not just out of the crucial overall need to achieve gender equality as an intrinsic condition of a successful democracy but as a specific way to help countries exhibiting each context to move forward democratically?

Before turning to the analysis of each context, it is important to understand the relevant boundaries and definitions of women's political empowerment. And to help position the analysis in this paper within other examinations of aid for women's political empowerment, the annex outlines the state of existing research on women's political empowerment programming, highlighting some of the other main outstanding questions that go beyond the issue of strategic differentiation.

Boundaries and Definitions

The boundaries of assistance relating to women's political empowerment are difficult to delineate precisely; definitions of women's political empowerment vary among institutions. USAID's Women in Power project offers this definition:[3]

- The equal participation, representation, and leadership of women within government institutions, political parties, and civically engaged organizations;
- Women's free exercise of the authority inherent in those positions; and
- The regular creation, implementation, and enforcement of laws and policies that address women's rights, positions, and priorities.

As stated earlier, U.S. assistance programs carried out under the rubric of women's political empowerment tend to concentrate on institutions and processes directly related to elections and political representation, especially voting, parties, and legislative offices. These programs incorporate some activities by or for civil society organizations, such as gender-oriented voter education campaigns and civic activism around gender quotas. Their efforts to strengthen women's leadership often extend to include civic as well as political activists. Nevertheless, they tend to emphasize political actors and processes. Two other areas of assistance programming, specifically relating to civil society development and the reform of state institutions, also contribute to

women's political empowerment, even though they are not labelled as such.

The civil society side: In the domain of civil society strengthening, there are many activities that contribute to women's political empowerment. These often focus on building women's rights organizations and other rights organizations that seek to advance women's rights (for example, through raising citizen awareness, advocacy for new policies and legislation, and grassroots organizing). They also include efforts to (1) increase the capacity of women in journalism, especially in the leadership of media organizations; (2) integrate gender issues into civic education programs; and (3) bolster the role of women in labor organizations.

At the risk of muddying the analytic waters, one can argue that little distinction exists between the "political" and the "civic" in women's empowerment—political empowerment inherently affects the civic domain and vice versa. Nevertheless, programming labels and categories do exist. Many types of women's empowerment programs fall under the rubric of civil society assistance rather than political empowerment assistance. Funders often prefer to avoid or limit labelling assistance as "political" or "political empowerment" given the widespread sensitivities to external actors working on politics. And many maintain, at least publicly, that there is a meaningful line between work that focuses on political processes and institutions and work that focuses on civil society strengthening and activism, even if only concerning which types of organizations are the main interlocutors or partners.

The state side: Women's political empowerment also extends in another direction (beyond elections and legislative institutions and the civil society side): it can also involve trying to increase the number, capacity, and role of women in state institutions, including executive branch ministries, judicial systems, and security institutions. However, such efforts usually exist within programs that focus on institutional capacity building; they are rarely separated out and described as women's political empowerment programming per se. More often, they are simply one element of a larger program with other purposes (for example, increasing gender equality in judicial appointments as part of a larger judicial strengthening program). A new tool for measuring women's political empowerment developed by the Women in Power project seeks to give greater attention to this state side: the Diamond Leadership Model puts forward a broad measure of women's political leadership that looks horizontally across the legislative, executive, judicial, and security sectors.[4]

The gender rebalancing of states is not just about the number and role of women within state apparatuses. It also concerns gender-sensitive or gender-balanced patterns of

state functioning. This might include, for example, introducing gender-responsive budget analysis or making accountability systems responsive to the specific abuses of power that poor women experience. Or it might mean revising legislation and police/judicial practice to ensure the adequate investigation and prosecution of crimes against women.[5]

Although this paper focuses primarily on the elections and political representation side of women's political empowerment work, its analysis could be extended to all assistance activities that contribute to women's political empowerment, no matter how labelled.

Political equality versus political empowerment: Also important to understand is the relationship between women's political *equality* (which is often about numerical gender equality and legal equality) and women's political *empowerment* (which is about changes in actual power relations). Although programs focused on the place of women in parties and elected offices are usually described as women's political empowerment programs, arguably, they concentrate more on political equality than political empowerment per se. That is, they emphasize increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions in parties, in election campaigns as candidates, and in elected offices. At the same time, however, some of the elements of this standard menu, such as efforts to empower and activate newly elected women legislators, could be said to go beyond a focus on equality to a direct focus on empowerment. Of course, there is not a wall between equality and empowerment—the hope is often that greater equality will lead to greater empowerment (in other words, to a change in the actual power structures determining gender relations). But how much that causal link occurs, or perhaps more accurately when and why it occurs, remains a source of debate and empirical questioning.

One notable analytic contribution to this question has been made by Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, who examine when and why governments promulgate policies that advance gender equality, with special attention to the role of religion.[6] They distinguish between policies that improve women's lives as a *status group* (helping all women) and those that address *class inequalities* among women (helping economically disadvantaged women) and then divide those categories further between policies that challenge the doctrine of the dominant religion in the society and those that do not. Using this typology, they identify how different structural factors, like degree of democracy or percentage of women in parliament, tend to produce change on what sorts of policy issues, such as abortion and violence against women.

Political empowerment versus social, economic, and cultural empowerment: One additional relationship to consider is the one between aid aimed at fostering women's political empowerment and aid aimed at women's social, economic, and cultural empowerment. Reflecting the much greater weighting in international assistance toward socioeconomic assistance versus political assistance generally (approximately a ten to one ratio for many major Western donors), the amount of programming that goes to women's social and economic empowerment is much greater than that explicitly targeting women's political empowerment.

The relationship between women's political empowerment and women's socioeconomic empowerment is a contested issue, in parallel with broader debates within the assistance community over the relationship between political and economic development. For some development aid providers, focusing on the betterment of women's economic status and conditions is both safer ground for donors committed to gender issues (given sensitivities about political assistance in many countries) and also analytically logical; these providers argue that economic advancement is a natural building block toward broader empowerment that may include political empowerment sometime down the road. Aid providers that are more oriented toward work that explicitly targets political issues (especially democratization) tend to hold the reverse view—that focusing on women's political empowerment is a natural building block toward economic empowerment, or at a minimum, an integral part of women's empowerment work, to be pursued simultaneously with economic empowerment work and not put off for some later time. They would argue, for example, that systematic bias in lending laws against women will more likely be fully reversed over time if women are politically empowered within the relevant governing institutions that determine banking laws and regulations.

I turn now to analyzing the strategic approaches to women's political empowerment in the three political contexts that represent movement away from the assumed democratic transition paradigm. It is important to bear in mind that these political contexts are not immutable categories. Countries sometimes move from one to another suddenly and sometimes experience elements of two or even three contexts simultaneously. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo might be considered a stuck transition, yet also has semiauthoritarian and conflict attributes.

Stuck Transitions

Defining the Category

In stuck transitions, countries move away from authoritarian rule at least some distance, establishing the basic institutional forms of democracy, but then stop advancing, falling into political stasis and stagnation rather than achieving democratic consolidation.

On the positive side, such countries usually have some important elements of democratic life, including (1) considerable political openness, with little systematic repression of basic political and civil rights; (2) relatively free and fair elections, with active participation by multiple, diverse political parties; and (3) an active, diverse range of civil society organizations engaged in both advocacy and service delivery.

Despite these elements, the countries become stuck in at least one of three ways. First, they can suffer from a *profoundly weak representational relationship between power holders and citizens*—one that does not deepen despite successive elections. Power holders rely on clientelism and co-optation; often engage in significant, systemic corruption; and are not held to account through strong processes of accountability. The disconnect between power holders and citizens provokes deep cynicism and alienation over time among many citizens.

> Most countries that have moved away from authoritarianism relatively recently and are on a path to democratic consolidation exhibit serious weaknesses with representation and accountability.

Two countries exhibiting this first type of stuck transition include Honduras and Bulgaria. While Honduras appeared to be slowly consolidating democratic norms and practices during the previous two decades, a 2009 military coup and a controversial 2015 supreme court decision to end presidential term limits have called this progress into question. Rampant gang violence, extensive corruption, and official impunity plague the political system, which is dominated by two deeply entrenched, collusive political parties. Bulgaria, despite many alternations of power through credible elections over the past twenty-five years, has struggled with persistently poor patterns of political governance and low levels of citizen faith in established political actors. None of the main political parties or groupings has been effective at remedying entrenched rule of law deficiencies.

Second, a country's political life can be blocked *by an unproductive, persistent standoff between the main contending political forces*, either through some formal, frozen power-sharing arrangement, or an informal standoff, that prevents any strengthening of basic governance processes.

Two countries exhibiting this type of stuck transition include Lebanon and Bangladesh.

Long one of the most politically open and pluralistic Arab states, Lebanon nevertheless lives under a frozen power-sharing arrangement that undercuts basic processes of political participation and representation, preventing a deepening of democratic processes and norms. Bangladesh has had a functional democratic system for decades but is now gripped by a political standoff between its two main political parties, which is resulting in growing political gridlock, tension, and violence.

Third, a significant amount of a country's political power can rest outside of the elected political institutions—enough to constitute an effective veto or even direct control over significant areas of political decisionmaking, thus undercutting those institutions and creating an opaque, usually corrupted "deep state." Such power usually resides either in military or internal security institutions or in informal power circles, including business circles connected to such institutions.

Pakistan exhibits this type of stuck transition. Although it enjoys genuine competition among different political parties, and some significant degree of political openness, substantial areas of important decisionmaking are held offstage by the military and intelligence establishments.

The boundary between stuck transitions and transitions that are shaky but still moving forward is not sharp. Most countries that have moved away from authoritarianism relatively recently and are on a path to democratic consolidation exhibit serious weaknesses with representation and accountability. It is often difficult to determine whether a country is still gradually deepening democratic processes or is stagnating politically. For example, South Africa has, in some ways, been making significant progress in cementing democratic principles and procedures over the past two decades. Yet, in recent years, political problems have mounted, including significant corruption, rising public disaffection, and questionable commitment within the longtime ruling establishment to strengthening processes of accountability and representation. Brazil is another ambiguous case. What seemed for more than two decades to be a country on a noteworthy path of democratic consolidation has recently hit a wall, with the exposure of pervasive, deep corruption among power holders and massive citizen anger and political paralysis.

Gender Characteristics

Stuck transitions typically have all the common gender characteristics of political life found in an assumed standard transition, such as systemic underrepresentation of women in all levels of political life. But they also have some distinctive characteristics

relating to gender and politics. For example, in most transitional countries, reform processes that open up political party structures to greater inclusion of women are slow moving and difficult, but they tend to be especially so in stuck transition contexts given that a defining condition of such contexts is that parties typically make little progress in increasing their ties to citizens or reforming generally. In Lebanon, attempts to increase the role of women in political parties have proved frustrating; there is a lack of openness within the main political parties to reforms generally and, specifically, the wider inclusion of new social forces.

> It is crucial to avoid any blanket application of the standard menu and instead look for specific elements that may represent entry points or responses to the stuck nature of the transition.

In stuck transitions marked by opaque deep states, power structures—often dominated by elites within military establishments, religious hierarchies, or the extractive sector—tend to be heavily male-dominated and are actively uninterested in or opposed to increasing transparency or inclusion in ways that might increase women's political voice and participation in decisionmaking. Yet, Pakistan represents an interesting possible counterexample. Despite an overall political context in which power holders outside the civilian political sector continue to hold key reins of governance, women have managed over the past ten years to forge a greater place in the country's main political parties, with positive gender effects at least in representation at the local and national levels—though the effect on gender-relevant policy outcomes has been limited to date.

In short, an integral characteristic of the stuck context is an even greater disfavoring of the role of women in politics than in the standard transition context.

Effects on Programming for Women's Political Empowerment

Carrying out assistance for women's political empowerment in stuck transitions usually involves significant frustration. The stuck nature of the democratization process tends to undercut many elements of the standard menu of women's political empowerment programming, relating to both political parties and elected institutions. For effective strategic differentiation, it is therefore crucial to avoid any blanket application of the standard menu and instead look for specific elements that may represent entry points or responses to the stuck nature of the transition. Such elements could include the following:

- Emphasizing constituency outreach work by women in parties to try to build an alternative to patterns of clientelism and patronage. Some practitioners who have

helped political parties develop constituency outreach offices in different countries note that women politicians are often better at maximizing the opportunities that such offices present. This appears to be true both because women officials are able to connect with women constituents with a clear agenda of issues of mutual interest and because women officials are often given less support from their own parties than are their male counterparts—and thus, they work harder at constituency outreach as an alternative.

- Identifying ways for women in parties and political institutions to emphasize anticorruption, given the especially destructive role corruption usually plays in stuck transitions and the perceptual advantage women politicians often have on corruption issues. Such efforts may include a focus on types of corruption that significantly affect women, such as adulterated food supplies, violations of alcohol licenses (leading to proliferation of alcohol sold to men), and sexual molestation of children in school by teachers.

- Focusing on the local level as a way of avoiding stagnant national political parties or elected institutions. In Armenia, for example, an NDI program working to capacitate women mayors found good uptake despite problems with parties and the political system at the national level.

- Giving greater emphasis to connecting women in political parties to women civic activists, as a way of trying to find drivers of change willing to push the overall political establishment.

- Helping funders and partners to be patient regarding results and to recognize that small progress within larger negative contexts can nevertheless be significant.

Women's Political Empowerment as a Specific Driver of Change

Can work on women's political empowerment be a special lever for change in stuck transitions? That is, when democracy aid groups develop overall country strategies in such circumstances, can a case be made that work on women's political empowerment is crucial not just as a general imperative of political equality but also as an "unsticking" tool?

Of course, modest expectations must accompany such a line of thinking. Stuck transitions are stuck for deep, serious reasons. "Unsticking" them is almost always a complex conundrum for domestic and international actors alike. If there were any simple way to make quick progress, it would already have been pursued. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify ways in which women's political empowerment programming may directly address issues at the core of stuck transitions.

An important example concerns the dysfunctionality in basic processes of political representation that defines many stuck transitions—both the lack of basic interactive connections between citizens and institutions and also the political gridlock common in such contexts. In some countries, multiparty women's caucuses and legislatures have demonstrated a notable capacity to undertake the hard, step-by-step work of forging a positive feedback loop of citizen engagement and institutional responsiveness around some basic policy issues that cut across divided lines. In Peru, for example, the Women's Peruvian Parliamentary Caucus—comprising a majority of women across five parliamentary blocs and the national legislature and assisted by the International Republican Institute—has succeeded in engaging women at the grassroots level on a series of issues of concern to them (for example, violence against women and recognition of reproductive rights) and getting those issues translated into positive legislative reforms. Similarly, the Women's Wings Working Group in Nepal, comprising women active in the main political parties and supported by NDI and other external actors, has carried out extensive consultations with women at the grassroots level and then translated their concerns up the political chain to the country's national legislature and achieved some policy impact.

Women's political empowerment undertakings of this type have several advantages in trying to establish working links between citizens and their elected institutions and to overcome political polarization:

- An inclination to take on practical socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues of direct interest to identifiable constituencies.
- The willingness to do the grassroots outreach work necessary to directly reach citizens normally neglected by the state.
- The ability to translate citizen concerns into legislative action (thanks to their explicitly political makeup).
- The ability to build some bridges legislatively across divided partisan lines and political standoffs.

Of course, such undertakings are not the only ways in which citizens can be connected with legislative and other elected institutions in stuck transitional contexts. Yet, the above advantages of a gender focus can help address the basic representational dysfunctionality that is characteristic of stuck transitions, even if only in small ways.

Semiauthoritarian Contexts

Defining the Category

At least several dozen countries that attempted transitions away from authoritarian rule in the last few decades have lapsed into semiauthoritarian or even back into fully authoritarian rule. Implementing programs for women's political empowerment in semiauthoritarian contexts involves some important strategic considerations that vary considerably from those dominant in more standard contexts.

Semiauthoritarian regimes engage in a constant balancing act between political openness and constraint. On the one hand, they allow some elements of democratic politics, usually including a certain amount of space for open political debates, multiparty life, independent civic activity, an at least somewhat independent national legislature, and possibly some judicial independence. Yet, on the other hand, they maintain enough control over the levers of political power to ensure their power is never seriously threatened. They blur the line between the state and the ruling party, both financially and functionally, giving themselves access to resources that dwarf those available to other political actors. They curtail the available political space on a selective, tactical basis to thwart the rise of any serious political challengers. In particular, although they may allow national, multiparty elections at the legislative level and, at the executive level, in presidential systems, they make sure that they win or at least dominate those elections, taking measures when needed (for example, barring leading opposition candidates, dominating the state media, using state resources for campaigns, intimidating opposition parties, and engaging in vote fraud).[7]

Semiauthoritarian regimes vary quite widely in terms of the amount of openness they allow and how much they genuinely respect the idea of legitimate opposition politics. At the negative end of the spectrum are governments such as those in Uganda and Kazakhstan; at the more positive end are those in Morocco and Singapore. Other cases are in between, such as Malaysia.

Semiauthoritarian regimes differ from fully authoritarian regimes in that the latter allow no significant elements of democratic politics; they severely limit basic political and civil rights, curtail any real space for opposition political parties, restrict all independent civil society activity that is politically challenging, and override horizontal checks and balances on the executive from the legislative and judicial branches. If they allow elections at all, the elections are clearly a sham carried out for purposes of political legitimization.

Although, in principle, one can delineate a relatively clear set of differences between semiauthoritarian and authoritarian regimes, in practice, the line between these two categories is not always distinct. Some semiauthoritarian countries descend into a level

of political restriction and constraint that verges on full authoritarianism, even though they maintain at least some elements of political openness and pluralism. For example, Belarus allows opposition parties to compete in elections, and there is at least some public space for political debate. Yet, the amount of space and openness is so small and so controlled that the exercise of power can be considered authoritarian. Egypt and Azerbaijan are now similar in this regard.

This blurring of the two categories is evident in that the label "authoritarian" is often applied to countries with at least some semiauthoritarian characteristics. Assessing how meaningful those characteristics are is not an exact science. Thus, whether Russia today should be considered a semiauthoritarian or authoritarian regime is a matter on which analysts could easily and legitimately disagree.

It is notable that assistance for women's political empowerment has been and continues to be carried out in a sizeable number of semiauthoritarian or authoritarian contexts in recent years (for example, in Belarus, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Guinea, Jordan, Morocco, Togo, and Uzbekistan).

Gender Characteristics

Underrepresentation of women in political life is seriously exacerbated in semiauthoritarian countries because of limitations on the electoral process. The bounded and often manipulated character of elections in these countries undercuts the meaningfulness of women voting, becoming active in political parties, competing for elected office, and engaging in other basic elements of electoral participation. Given that in some semiauthoritarian countries a certain amount of genuine political space is allowed, this closure of space for women's political participation is not total. But even in the most liberal of semiauthoritarian contexts, it is a serious constraint. And in more authoritarian contexts, it is a crushing one. It is not a coincidence that almost every semiauthoritarian and authoritarian leader in the world is a man. The multiplication of women presidents in the world over the past ten years is almost entirely limited to the domain of democratic countries.

In addition, semiauthoritarian and authoritarian contexts entail other limitations on space for women in politics:

- Limitations on space for independent civil society activity greatly reduce important channels for women's political empowerment by constraining or prohibiting women's rights organizations, human rights groups more generally, and other types of civil society organizations in which women in more open contexts

frequently find room for action.

- The frequent demonization of foreign influence, especially foreign support for civil society, negatively impacts women's groups and women's activists with international ties. It reduces funding available for women's empowerment assistance and greatly inhibits the activities of networks of women working cooperatively across borders. And in some cases, women's groups or movements are singled out for harassment, especially when populist strongmen turn to a patriarchal narrative of putatively traditional social values—for example, as both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have done in recent years.

- The crony capitalism characteristic of most semiauthoritarian and authoritarian systems tends to concentrate economic power in the hands of entrenched patriarchal elites. It limits space for new, independent women business actors who could establish meaningful channels of political engagement through business associations or other means.

- Negative social norms relating to gender equality in some semiauthoritarian and authoritarian countries—especially those that utilize a conservative social agenda as part of their overall sociopolitical positioning—may constrain women officeholders in parliaments or executive branch positions relative to men in similar positions.

Effects on Programming for Women's Political Empowerment

Semiauthoritarian and authoritarian contexts pose challenges with regard to differentiating strategies for women's political empowerment. The political constraints of such contexts cut against the basic idea of focusing on voting, parties, and elected institutions as both drivers and targets of women's empowerment. Aid providers need to ask a series of threshold questions in such contexts, regarding whether and how this work should be pursued.

First, there is the basic question of whether simply too little political space exists to achieve significant progress in any area of democratization. In Togo and Uzbekistan, two authoritarian countries, several externally funded efforts to support women's empowerment were eventually abandoned as a result of not gaining any traction—part of a larger decision to give up most democracy work in these countries.

> The level at which women's empowerment work is conducted should be carefully considered.

Yet, in some cases, remaining active in an unpromising authoritarian or

semiauthoritarian setting can end up paying off. In Burkina Faso, NDI carried out women's political empowerment work for years starting in the middle 2000s, struggling to make progress in the face of an overall constricted political environment dominated by an unbending president. But then, in 2014, the political tables turned as citizen anger against the president broke out in the form of large-scale protests, leading to the breaking up of the dominant party system and much freer and fair elections in 2015. Women's political activism played a key role in those changes (for example, women led the first major protest against the president in 2014).

Second, the level at which women's empowerment work is conducted should be carefully considered. In some semiauthoritarian or authoritarian contexts, regimes allow elements of openness and meaningfulness in local-level elections and representative structures that they disallow at the national level. In such contexts, working on women's political empowerment at the local level can be a valuable undertaking, potentially the most worthwhile element of the standard menu of programming. But in other such contexts, the apparent openness of political activity at the local level is simply a façade, granted by strongmen leaders to distract domestic and international actors angling to find a democratic opening. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni engineered quotes to increase the number of women in Parliament, but these women parliamentarians remain basically beholden to him and his party. In such cases, working on women's political empowerment, or on other forms of voter or candidate assistance at that level, is not only futile, but can help the sitting regime legitimize its charade. Thorough assessments and judgments are needed before aid organizations decide to engage at the local level.

Third, aid providers must decide whether to work with the ruling party on programs aimed at strengthening women and political parties or strengthening political parties more generally. Usually in semiauthoritarian or authoritarian countries, external aid providers who wish to support political reforms need to include the ruling party in their efforts to gain access to the political party domain. Yet, providing assistance that may help broaden the reach of a ruling party that oversees systematic human rights violations and the manipulation of elections can raise ethical issues. The argument that there can be intrinsic value in helping even a repressive ruling party do more to include women in political life may be strong enough in some cases to justify such work, yet the tradeoff needs to be actively argued and made, not simply assumed.

Fourth, there is the question of whether working with the parliament of a semiauthoritarian country would have any impact. In some semiauthoritarian contexts, the national legislature is a place where genuine multipartyism operates, with significant effects on policy choices. Morocco is one such example; although its monarch and the

power circles directly around him remain the final authority on some key matters, the Moroccan Parliament does play a significant legislative role on many issues. In such cases, working with women parliamentarians—through a multiparty women's caucus or through efforts to help women parliamentarians gain governance capacity—can be valuable both in terms of advancing the role of women and furthering democratization. Yet, in other semiauthoritarian contexts, the national legislature, even though it may have representation from opposition parties or independent legislators, is a politically barren place, mostly just useful to the regime as a legitimizing symbol. In such cases, investing in efforts to increase the role of women in the legislature—like other elements of legislative strengthening work—may be either a waste of time or a useful assist to the undemocratic power structure, or both.

Women's Political Empowerment as Specific Driver of Change

Can work on women's political empowerment be a lever for change in semiauthoritarian contexts? That is, when democracy aid groups think through overall country strategies in such places, can a case be made that work on women's political empowerment is specifically useful as a way to help a country move past semiauthoritarianism?

One basic argument for making this case is that focusing on women may be perceived by power holders as less sensitive or threatening than other types of work that directly address issues relating to voting, political parties, and elected institutions. Working with women may help to (1) empower women in ways that ultimately lead to significantly challenging the sitting regime (such as in Burkina Faso) and (2) get aid organizations "in the door" of political parties and other sensitive political institutions, which may open avenues for work with other elements of these institutions. For example, in Cambodia, which has a highly restrictive political environment, USAID decided to make women a major focus of its recently initiated, multiyear democracy program, in part based on USAID's judgement that such a focus would be perceived as less threatening to a government currently imposing new restrictions on some areas of external assistance.

Of course, the argument that work on women's political empowerment is of special value in such contexts because of being less sensitive to touchy governments must be weighed against a counterargument: that the reason governments find such work less politically sensitive is that they know it often takes place at the sidelines of political power and does not represent a lever of significant political change. But this counterargument must be assessed with an awareness that some persons may be discounting the significance of women's political activists out of a reflexive sexist attitude about the political role of women generally.

Another argument for women's political empowerment as a unique lever of change in semiauthoritarian contexts concerns elections. A number of semiauthoritarian regimes have fallen through "electoral revolutions." These are situations where a semiauthoritarian regime goes ahead with an election, assuming it will be able to constrain the political landscape enough to ensure that it wins, but then finds itself facing an unexpectedly strong challenge. It suddenly faces the difficult choice of stifling that challenge in ways that are likely to be obvious and crude—and facing the potential public reaction—or allowing a relatively free and fair process and taking the chance of losing. Regime changes in Slovakia in 1998, Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, Kyrgyzstan in 2005, and Sri Lanka in 2015 are all examples of this phenomenon.

In such situations, outside assistance has often played an important role in creating the foundations for an electoral process that can withstand distortive pressures by the regime (through voter education, domestic monitoring, media watch programs, and support to beleaguered opposition parties). Women's political activism can play a crucial role in these election-related efforts through gender-oriented civic education that helps increase voter turnout, active women's participation in monitoring efforts, a push by women for change in previously dormant and now operative opposition parties, and support for women political figures as alternatives to discredited incumbents (which was one factor in the coming to power of former president Roza Otunbayeva in Kyrgyzstan in 2010).

> The relationship between conflict and democratization has proven complex during the past few decades, with several important cases arising that negate the standard assumption that conflict resolution and democratization go hand-in-hand.

One other argument in favor of women's political empowerment work as an entry point in semiauthoritarian or authoritarian contexts concerns the generational angle. For stagnant, strongmen regimes that have become experts in co-optation of key groups as a method of undercutting opposition, unhappy youth (often thought of as young men and engaged with on that basis) represent a serious source of concern. Youth are often among the primary victims of the unemployment and underemployment characteristic of stagnant, co-optive systems but are also often among those most adept at organizing fluid protest movements that manage to spark public discontent. Youth have been actively involved in most protest movements that have ousted governments around the world during the last ten years. Working to foster women's political activism and

empowerment can be an important dimension of efforts to engage and energize youth with regard to needed democratic change. There may be greater openness among young people to the basic idea of women's political empowerment than among older people. And politically oriented youth organizations may be less weighed down by entrenched patriarchal power structures than political parties and other organizations run by older people and thus offer a good venue for a strong role by young women.

Conflict-Affected Transitions

Defining the Category

The transition paradigm of the 1990s included postconflict transitions as a variant of the standard democratic transition. Countries coming out of conflict at the same time they were also exiting authoritarianism combined the ending of conflict with an attempted democratic transition (as in Cambodia and Mozambique in the 1990s). Or they were countries coming out of conflict and attempting to renovate prior flawed democratic systems to overcome serious democratic deficiencies (as in El Salvador and Guatemala in the late 1980s and early 1990s, respectively). The postconflict elements of the standard transitional model included negotiating a peace accord, writing a new constitution, demobilizing and disarming former combatants, and reforming the security sector, as well as other forms of reconciliation reintegration. The assumption was that the postconflict process would be an integral part of the democratization process.

Some countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mozambique, have moved significantly along the standard path in the intervening years, though their democratic transitions have been shaky and marked by serious political shortcomings. A few countries, including Colombia and Sri Lanka, have more recently started on the path. Some of the anticipated postconflict democratic transitions of the 1990s ended up lapsing into semiauthoritarian or authoritarian rule even as the exit from conflict succeeded over time, such as in Angola and Cambodia.

More broadly, however, the relationship between conflict and democratization has proven complex during the past few decades, with several important cases arising that negate the standard assumption that conflict resolution and democratization go hand-in-hand.

First, some authoritarian countries not in the midst of civil war have attempted a democratic transition and then experienced a surge of conflict as they fail to achieve a new political settlement that peacefully brings in all major political forces. Afghanistan and Iraq represent two such cases, and in both, the conflict emerging after the exit from

authoritarianism has persisted for more than ten years. Libya and South Sudan represent two more recent cases.

Second, some countries that have entered into democratic transitions have experienced eruptions of conflict somewhere down the transitional path. In some cases, this is civil conflict relating to the emergence of significant violent extremist groups, such as in Mali, Nigeria, and Yemen. In other cases, involving much lower levels of violence, the conflict is between the two main established political sides in the country's democratic system, together with military intervention in politics, such as in Bangladesh and Thailand.

Third, some countries that were experiencing conflict under prior authoritarian systems have continued to experience the same conflict, or mutations of that conflict, despite attempting democratic change. Burma and Pakistan represent two such cases.

In short, the complexities of varied conflict-affected transitions should be considered in any attempt to differentiate strategies for women's political empowerment and for democratization generally. This category contains a much wider range of political contexts than was contained in the concept of "postconflict transitions" that initially found a place within the transition paradigm and still often dominates the framing of conflict discussions in Western aid circles.

Gender Characteristics

The negative effects of violent conflict on the role of women in politics are many and profound and represent one crucial part of the devastating effects that violent conflict has on the situation of women generally in conflict-affected societies. The single most important political effect is an overarching blockage of women's political empowerment. This takes place in at least two ways. First, governments of countries experiencing major conflict tend inevitably to be preoccupied with fighting, which results in an overweighting of security and intelligence forces that are traditionally dominated by men and an underweighting of other political institutions that may have a higher level of representation of women. Second, some violence is almost always aimed directly at women, creating a powerful disincentive for women to push for changes in existing social norms in the direction of a higher profile and greater engagement of women in public life. Researchers Pilar Domingo and Clare Cummings at the Overseas Development Institute note the following:

Stories of women and gender activists suffering from violence aimed at discouraging their political participation are rife both at local and national levels. . . . Patriarchal norms within state bodies or security providers result in a failure to protect women, and reflects high

levels of complicity with perpetrators of violence or harassment against women. Overall, unresolved legacies of conflict and continuities in recourse to violence by different actors in state and society is deeply problematic for women's sense of safety and security, affecting capacity and opportunities for voice and agency.[8]

Another gender characteristic of political life in conflict-affected contexts is that women can be both victims and perpetrators of conflict:

Women and girls are not merely victims of armed conflict. They are active agents. They make choices, possess critical perspectives on their situations, and organize collectively in response to those situations. Women and girls can perpetrate violence and support violence perpetrated by others. They become active members of conflict because they are committed to the political, religious, or economic goals of those involved in violence. This can mean, and has meant, taking up arms and liberation struggles, resistance to occupation or participation in struggles against inequality on race, ethnic, religious, or class/caste lines.[9]

An additional important gender characteristic—one that sometimes implies positive opportunities for women's political empowerment—is that the conflict sometimes results in at least a partial opening up of previously established gender roles, creating more scope for women to actively engage in different elements of public and private life:

While the negative consequences of conflict are widely accepted, the disturbance of established norms can also have unintended positive effects on the status and role of women in their societies, and therefore on their role in development. For example, women's social and economic responsibilities may increase when women are obliged to take over the responsibility of supporting their households. Often that requires learning new skills that enable women to perform jobs previously held by men or that prepare them for entrepreneurial income-generating activities. This can help women achieve greater financial independence and lead to long-term changes in the gendered division of labor.[10]

A shift in gender power relationships can occur in part because of changes in demographics resulting from large-scale violence—more women may survive the conflict than men and therefore begin to take on new roles. In Rwanda, women were able to advance their position within a number of institutions in the wake of conflict in the 1990s (for example, through constitutional revisions and quotas).[11]

More broadly, serious civil conflict can mean the tearing down and eventual reconstruction of fundamental political institutions, putting into flux a whole series of issues relating to the basic rules of political participation. This may present

opportunities for women to assert themselves both in the processes of reconstituting institutions and in creating rules that ensure a greater place for them in the postconflict order. Though an unfortunate pattern in some postconflict environments has been a reassertion of traditional gender norms, with earlier gains lost.

Effects on Programming for Women's Political Empowerment

Violent conflict may have multiple effects on the core processes and institutions that are the usual focus of women's political empowerment programming. It may curtail citizen participation in elections among certain groups or in certain areas of the country. It may distort the political party system, whether by the presence of armed elements and some parties or by the denial of space to certain political actors. It may undercut the role of the national legislature in favor of a fortified executive branch. It may fuel divisive political narratives that work against efforts aimed at broader political inclusion. Thus, programming for women's political empowerment will need to analyze carefully each area of the standard menu to ensure that programs related to voter education, party reform, candidate training, elected official capacity, and other areas are well-tailored to the particular conflict-affected context.

> Conflict sometimes results in at least a partial opening up of previously established gender roles, creating more scope for women to actively engage in different elements of public and private life.

Conflict-affected transitional contexts open up four significant areas for women's political empowerment work. The first is women's participation in peace negotiations. As the International Crisis Group concluded in a study of the role of women in peacebuilding, "Peacebuilding cannot succeed if half the population is excluded from the process. Crisis Group's research in Sudan, Congo (DRC), and Uganda suggest that peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction, and governance do better when women are involved. Women make a difference, in part because they adopt a more inclusive approach toward security and address key social and economic issues that would otherwise be ignored."[12] A considerable body of research exists on the role of women in peace negotiations, emphasizing both the importance of the role that women can play and have played in numerous peace processes; but it also highlights the continuing tendency for women to be underrepresented in many such processes.[13] As a study by CARE finds, "Participation by women in the negotiation of a political settlement, peace building, and post-conflict governance remains often inconsistent and tokenistic. Huge volumes of policy statements and seminar reports on SCR 1325 [the watershed UN Security Council resolution in 2000 that recognized the effects of

conflict on women and advocated for great roles for women in peacebuilding] have been issued, but much of the action remains declarative rather than operational."[14]

Second, conflict-affected contexts, at least when they move into a phase of resolution, often involve constitution-writing processes. Writing a new constitution may be the actual centerpiece of a peace process or an additional crucial element following from a peace agreement negotiated separately. Helping ensure an active role of women in constitution-writing processes is an important opportunity—in terms of women political and civic activists preparing issues to be taken up in such processes and in terms of women taking part as members of constitution-drafting teams. The general international trend to make constitution-writing processes more participatory and the increased attention to the gender dimension of constitutions are crucial factors in opening the door to a greater role for women in these processes. Yet, it is vital to remember that the starting point remains problematic. As Helen Irving explains, "The literature on constitution-making is substantial but, until recently, gender as an imperative of design has received little attention, and most analyses have been narrowly framed. Even giving 'constitutional' its broadest compass—extending beyond the legal instrument, to institutions of governance and relations between the citizen and the state—we rarely find gender as a factor of which to take account, let alone as a lens through which to view constitutional design broadly."[15]

Similarly, in their study of gender and constitutional design and postconflict societies, Haynes, Ní Aoláin, and Cahn point out the following:

[W]omen's organizations are often the least well-prepared to address and impact the [constitution-writing] process, and are the most likely to be excluded. If we abandon the notion that the key constitutional challenges or changes are neatly held within the scope of one document or one singular process, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how women's needs and issues are likely to be left out of constitutional conversations in post-conflict societies.[16]

Despite these cautionary notes, women have played critical roles in some recent constitution-drafting processes related to conflict-affected contexts. Somalia is one important example.[17]

Third, conflict-affected settings sometimes provide opportunities for significant progress in gender equality if the resolution process involves rewriting basic electoral and political party laws. Gender quotas can be included, whether for parties or legislative institutions. Afghanistan, Burundi, and South Sudan offer example cases, though the

practical application of quotas has been problematic.

A fourth area for women's political empowerment work is security sector reform. Military, police, and intelligence agencies are usually highly exclusive of women in their leadership structures and throughout their ranks. Some countries stuck in persistent conflict experience a serious impetus toward institutional reform, opening up at least some possibility for greater gender balance and inclusion. In Liberia, where police and paramilitary forces were implicated in grave human rights abuses during the civil war, rebuilding the Liberian National Police became a priority for the United Nations Mission. Part of that effort included increasing the representation of women officers by setting a goal of 15 percent, despite women initially constituting only 2 percent of the force in 2005.[18] Through a series of gender-sensitive recruitment efforts and sustained attention by UN agencies and Liberian government ministries, that goal was achieved by 2013.[19]

Women's Political Empowerment as Specific Driver of Change

In conflict-affected transitional contexts, democracy assistance providers look to contribute not just to the larger goal of democratization but also to positive change in the conflict dynamic. Democracy assistance may include electoral reforms that decrease winner-take-all politics, civil society assistance that strengthens bonds between divided communities, or media work that helps fortify consensus-oriented, peaceful voices. Women's political empowerment work is critical to the overall enterprise of democratization, but it can also be a specific lever or entry point in such contexts. Women political activists and leaders can play central roles in opening up, advancing, and concluding peacebuilding processes. Training efforts aimed at giving women peace activists expertise in such areas as constitutional law, power-sharing agreements, and disarmament and demobilization and in such contexts can help fortify these roles.

> Women political activists and leaders can play central roles in opening up, advancing, and concluding peacebuilding processes.

Such efforts may be part of the early phase of peacebuilding, through support to grassroots women's networks and organizations at both local and national levels that can help assert and advance the peacebuilding agenda. They can also be part of the later phases of peacebuilding, including the implementation of peace accords and peace negotiation processes. One noted example is the work of the Women in Peacebuilding Network during the first and second civil wars in Liberia. Best known for its mass action campaign in 2003, the network was not only instrumental in pressuring

the various sides to accept the eventual 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement but also in advancing the subsequent disarmament process and ensuring women's participation in the 2005 elections.[20] Similar grassroots movements have had success in Guatemala, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Somaliland, and elsewhere.[21]

There are several distinctive advantages that women's political empowerment work has in addressing conflict dynamics. In the early stage of peacebuilding, women can sometimes articulate peacebuilding goals in intensely divided or ideologically inflamed contexts precisely because they are often disassociated from the main groups driving conflict. Also at this stage, they can often tap into legitimate grassroots networks of support to promote a peace agenda that commands legitimacy in the face of elites' severe resistance toward negotiation or compromise. In the later stages of peacebuilding, women's participation in negotiation processes may help bridge aggravated divides between mainstream political actors whether through specialized multiparty women's taskforces or groups that work apart from the main negotiations or through the participation of prominent women political or civic figures who can embody a peace agenda in ways that entrenched political elites cannot. Similarly, during postaccord implementation, greater women's participation can help keep attention focused on how to rebuild communities after the devastation of violence and how to forge a practical consensus on postconflict problem solving that helps avoid any relapse into conflict.

More broadly, greater inclusion of women in peace and reconciliation processes can contribute to the transformative nature of political transitions in ways that empower *all* citizens. Women's participation can help ensure that the new institutions are established in a way that transforms the old power structures, especially those that contributed to harming women during the conflict. Transitional justice processes may be one relevant mechanism. But broader strategies for transformative democratic transitions could help ensure the establishment of constitutions and treaties that address gender and women's rights in the articles of postconflict governing institutions. Women's involvement in these processes can also empower women to participate in postconflict decisionmaking, making them feel that their contributions are wanted and valued in the new era emerging after the end of hostilities.

Conclusions

Supporting women's political empowerment is a critically important part of international assistance, both for the democracy building side of the aid domain and the broader development enterprise. This is true both because democracy is incomplete when

women are systematically underrepresented and discriminated against and because political empowerment of women is vital for improving all areas of women's lives. Assistance for women's political empowerment is noteworthy for an additional reason— one often overlooked in debates over democracy promotion. With democracy suffering a general international pattern of stagnation and even backsliding, the realm of women's political empowerment stands in notable positive contrast: there is a clear upward trajectory in the role of women in politics in the developing world. Women are playing a growing and vital role in day-to-day political life at both local and national levels in dozens of countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, helping not only to strengthen governmental policies that take account of women's needs and interests but also to forge greater representativity of political institutions generally. One basic indication of this is that the average percentage of women in parliaments globally has doubled in the last twenty years.[22] Of course, enormous problems remain relating to women's political participation and gender relations and conditions in politics almost everywhere. *Nevertheless, in a global democracy landscape marked by considerable gloom, progress in women's political empowerment is one of the few bright spots of recent years.*

A daunting challenge for the democracy building community is the growing multiplication of types of transitional paths and outcomes and the resulting loss of confidence among democracy aid providers about which approaches are most effective in what contexts. All areas of democracy aid must grapple with differentiating strategies. A focus therefore on how to do so with regard to fostering women's political empowerment is very much needed. Probing the challenge of strategic differentiation not only helps identify the distinctive gender characteristics of different types of transitional contexts and what types of programs may be most effective in them; it also highlights that work on women's political empowerment can be a critical lever for change where attempted transitions have slipped into dysfunctional patterns.

For example, as discussed in this paper, certain elements of women's empowerment work can be particularly effective in certain transitional contexts:

- In stuck transitions, aid for women's political empowerment can be a productive way to address the core syndrome of failed representation that lies at the heart of political blockage and citizen alienation; this is thanks to the ability of some women political actors to take on issues of direct interest to identifiable constituencies and do the grassroots outreach work necessary to reach those people.
- In semiauthoritarian contexts, aid providers can sometimes make use of the

lowered sensitivities about women's political empowerment compared to other forms of political assistance to find ways to stay active in closing contexts and to nurture seeds of change that may eventually germinate when overall political conditions improve.

- In conflict-affected transitions, women's programming can be an indispensable way to create bridges across divided communities and mobilize peacebuilding actors with credibility and commitment.

This paper is at best a preliminary effort to address the challenge of differentiating strategies for aiding women's political empowerment. Much more analysis is needed to fully assess the distinctive gender characteristics of political life in different types of transitional contexts; understand the implications of these characteristics for women's political empowerment programming; and identify how work on women's political empowerment can help bring about broader democratic change in problematic transitional contexts. Such analysis is vital both to chart the next generation of women's political empowerment assistance and to highlight for nonspecialists in this field the importance of this assistance as a way to respond to the challenging realities of the global political landscape that now defines the world.

Annex

The Need for Research on Aid for Women's Political Empowerment

As with many areas of democracy assistance, the extensive aid activities around the world supporting women's political empowerment have not been matched by a substantial body of independent research and analysis of such work. Many program-specific evaluations exist, but they are rarely circulated widely and the findings are seldom synthesized into more general studies producing broader insights and conclusions. An important body of research and writing has been emerging over the past decade on the role of women in politics in developing and postcommunist countries.[23] However, such scholarship rarely examines the international assistance relating to the issue.

As a result, considerable room remains for empirically based analyses of women's political empowerment programming, going well beyond this paper's focus on strategic differentiation. A natural starting point for further work would be addressing basic operational questions rising from the main areas of assistance. These are a few examples:

Regarding gender-focused voter education:

- What types of gender-related voter education are perceived by women as most useful and what kind of changes in voter behavior does such education produce?

Regarding the position of women in political parties:

- What has been the utility of women's wings of parties as a means of fostering an enhanced place for women in party leadership structures, and what kinds of assistance are most useful in making these wings effective?
- What kinds of women leadership training are most effective over time in helping women advance within party leadership structures?

Regarding women's entry into elected office and effectiveness once there:

- What kinds of candidate training for women in local and national elections are most effective?
- Have there been successes in efforts to help women overcome the financial obstacles they commonly face to becoming candidates or to help them win elections once they have become candidates?
- What is the experience regarding the utility of women's political caucuses in national legislative bodies—when and in what ways are caucuses useful, and how can assistance best play a role in helping establish them?
- What kinds of efforts to link women political party leaders and activists with women civil society leaders and activists have been most fruitful, and what have been some of the most positive results?

Practitioners working on women's political empowerment programs have accumulated many insights and at least some partial answers to basic operational questions like these. But there is little systematic research that (1) explores these questions across multiple country contexts; (2) draws on independent information gathering not linked to interested aid organizations; and (3) synthesizes research findings, making them easily available to new practitioners entering the domain and to funders considering how best to support women's political empowerment.

These various specific operational questions connect to an overarching question about the impact of women's political empowerment work: how much can assistance—which mostly comprises the transfer of knowledge (through training or advising) and the assembling of actors to work together on issues of common concern—outweigh the powerful norms, incentives, and power structures that underlie the weak representation of women in the political life of most developing and postcommunist countries? For example, how much can leadership training for women in parties and advice to party

leaders about the value of incorporating women in leadership structures overcome the strong incentives and habits of male party leaders to maintain their own narrow hold on power and not include women more fully? Or, how much can training for women candidates and gender-oriented voter education counteract the many factors working against a greater role for women in elected institutions? This is, of course, the overarching question that all areas of democracy assistance face: the weight of assistance versus the weight of underlying causal factors. It is not specific to women's political empowerment. But the question takes on important specific dimensions in the realm of women in politics due to the power of underlying factors and forces favoring negative stasis. The answer to this question regarding any particular area of women's programming is usually, of course, "only to a certain extent." But it is determining to what extent, why, and in what circumstances that is crucial to advancing practice in this domain.

Answering these operational questions is also central to determining the direction of the causality of change with regard to women's empowerment: are increases in the role of women in political institutions more likely to be the driver or the result of social and economic changes in the role of women in society? A basic critique of assistance relating to women's political empowerment, though often only quietly stated behind the scenes, is that focusing on trying to recruit more women candidates and elect more women into office is an incorrect theory of change—one that is the result of politically formalistic thinking about societies. In this view, political institutions, especially representative ones, will only meaningfully change when norms and economic realities relating to the role of women in society change as a result of more generalized women's activism. Coming to grips with this question through more in-depth research on the effects of women's political empowerment programming is crucial to firmly ground the field.

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